POSTCOLONIAL AUTOMOBILITY

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Car Culture in West Africa

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UMP CS

For Oliver and Leo,
who love cars and trucks

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INTRODUCTION

Cars, Cultural Production, and Global Modernity

> *The motor-car is the epitome of "objects," the Leading-Object, and this fact should be kept in mind.*
>
> —Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*

> *Anyone who thinks evil of you, may this car run them over in their sleep. This car will hunt out your enemies, pursue their bad spirits, grind them into the road. Your car will drive over fire and be safe. It will drive into the ocean and be safe. It has friends in the spirit world. Its friend there, a car just like this one, will hunt down your enemies. They will not be safe from you. A bomb will fall on this car and it will be safe. I have opened the road for this car. It will travel all roads. It will arrive safely at all destinations.*
>
> —Ben Okri, *The Famished Road*

TOWARD THE END of Chimamanda Adichie's best-selling novel *Americanah* (2013), Ifemelu, a Nigerian woman who has just returned to Lagos after over a decade of living in America, sits beside her ex-boyfriend as they drive to his private club in upscale Victoria Island. Adichie writes that Ifemelu "would remember this moment, sitting beside Obinze in his Range Rover, stalled in traffic, listening to [Nigerian music] . . . beside them a shiny Honda, the latest model, and in front of them an ancient Datsun that looked a hundred years old" (544). The moment is memorable for Ifemelu because she has finally rekindled her romance with Obinze. But it is also memorable for all that it says about the new Lagos that Ifemelu returns to in 2009. The now-wealthy Obinze has acquired his Range Rover, along with a beautiful house, bank accounts, and a BMW, at a time when the Nigerian middle class is expanding under increased democracy and an array of business opportunities. Obinze himself has been rewarded for the part he plays in undervaluing real estate that is then bought up cheaply and resold at a high profit margin. And though he now feels uncomfortable with all the material objects he has acquired, this does not stop him from driving to his club in luxury. The driver of the new Honda has also presumably done well for him- or herself, but the Range Rover and the Honda share the road with the driver of the old Datsun who, like the majority of Nigerians, moves through the city with less ease and comfort. And all three of the cars are stuck together in the notoriously crippling Lagos traffic. Here, then, so many of the contradictions of modern Lagos play out on the road, in cars, and around cars.

Though it is a novel about so many things—race, gender, migration, romance—*Americanah* affords readers a specific insight into what Nigerian automobility and car culture look like in two distinct postcolonial moments. In the 1990s, when Nigeria was under the military rule of Sani Abacha and before Ifemelu left for America, "The country was starved of hope, cars stuck for days in long, sweaty petrol lines, pensioners raising wilting placards demanding their pay (55). Ifemelu's mother attends a church where she has the only shabby car in the parking lot because she hopes that she will be blessed with a nice car like the other worshippers. University students burn cars in front of the vice chancellor's house in protest of constant faculty strikes. And, at the same time, wealthy criminals "who donated cars with the ease of people giving away chewing gum" (62) are able to cruise the city with impunity. Years later when Ifemelu returns to Nigeria, the petrol lines have disappeared and hope, at least for select members of the educated middle class, has been restored. Ifemelu's previously unemployed father has a job at a bank and one of the first things he does is to purchase new tires for her mother's car and buy a mobile phone, ensuring the family's mobility.

But, at the same time, the roads and street life of Lagos in 2009 are as frenetic as they have always been. No longer accustomed to the chaos and energy, Ifemelu is inundated with scenes she had forgotten about: "At first Lagos assaulted her; the sun-dazed haste, the yellow buses full of squashed limbs, the sweating hawkers racing after cars, the advertisements on hulking billboards" (475). Despite the obvious presence of new wealth, Ifemelu observes the roadside rubbish, the accident victim lying on the side of the street, and the patina of the decaying buildings. And even in this new Lagos infrastructural impediments become a prime topic of conversation. When her friend Ranyinudo picks her up from the airport the immediate talk is about traffic, power outages, parking woes, and how Ranyinudo wants her married boyfriend to buy her a jeep before she breaks up with him because the roads are so terrible.

Americanah reveals how automobility and daily experiences on the road are a vital part of social life in Lagos: they are intertwined with identity, longing, and status in a way that seems particularly pressing and unrelenting. This is not to say that cars are radically different in America—in fact, many of Ifemelu's initial observations upon arriving in the United States reveal that car culture is more similar than she assumed. Ifemelu, surprised that the cars in America are not new and shiny, finds them "disappointingly matte" (127). And when she observes her aunt's wheezing American car that stands in contrast to the "green, glossy, intimidatingly streamlined" (54) Mazda she drove in Nigeria, it becomes clear that class rather than geographical location often determines what one drives. But after a very short period of time, cars in the American scenes of the novel are simply part of the landscape. They may be covered in snow, or parked in a parking lot of the organic grocery store, or playing loud music as they pass by, but people do not seem to fixate on them or integrate them into daily conversation with the same intensity as they do in Lagos. Unlike the Nigerian characters, the American characters are never introduced along with the type of car they drive, they do not seem to be particularly consumed with the need to acquire new cars, they do not carry on long conversations in stalled city traffic, and they almost never talk about infrastructural failures. Of course, cars in the United States are still objects that are crucial for mobility, they are still important signifiers of wealth and status, and they still break down, but what *Americanah* illustrates is that they are not discussed with either the same urgency or the same ambivalence.

The goal of *Postcolonial Automobility* is to examine the ways that aesthetic forms like *Americanah* set in motion the various and contradictory forms that automobility takes in postcolonial West Africa. The car, with its promise of autonomous, unfettered mobility—implicated in the term "automobility"—has often been called the commodity par excellence of postwar modernity and has perhaps been one of the most globally experienced technologies of the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries.[1] But as Adichie's novel indicates, despite its presence across the world and its iconicity in globally consumed media, the automobile is often experienced and valued in particular ways outside of a "First World" context. What the literary and visual texts that anchor this study do, then, is make palpable the complex ways that automobility in West Africa is, at once, an everyday practice, an ethos, a fantasy of autonomy and mobility, and an affective experience intimately tied to modern social life. As such, a study of automobility is also necessarily an exploration of the complicated ways that consumption, mobility, stasis, scarcity, and excess all intersect along West Africa's bumpy and multidirectional roads. The aim of *Postcolonial Automobility* is therefore to track the complex relationship African subjects have to cars and to automobility at a time when global modernity is simultaneously alienating and enticing, as it has been since the globalizing colonial encounter and as it continues to be today.

The Literary and Cinematic Life of Cars

In their introduction to *The Speed of Change: Motor Vehicles and People in Africa, 1890–2000*, Jan-Bart Gewald, Sabine Luning, and Klaas van Walraven argue that though "the arrival of the motor vehicle was the single most important factor for change in Africa in the twentieth century" there has been surprisingly little systematic research done on motorcars (2009a, 1). Furthermore, they suggest, works that focus on motorcars in Africa, with a handful of notable exceptions, tend to sideline the multiple ways that motorcars affect the everyday lives of Africans in rural and urban environments. And yet motorcars have profoundly impacted social life and day-to-day mobility and have become important practical and symbolic technologies. Historically, as the editors of *The Speed of Change* suggest, "the colonial state relied heavily on motor vehicles for the extension and enforcement of its control at a symbolic and functional level" (4). Roads were built, often with conscripted or coerced labor, in order to export goods to the metropole, sell products back to colonial subjects, patrol towns, and maintain order. During both colonial and postcolonial times, motor vehicles were used to collect taxes, police borders, spread missionary values, and promote health care and other developmentalist projects, often at costs to the environment and to local communities. Both cars and roads, then, have been key to "disciplining a subject population" (5).

But, at the same time, as I'll be discussing in chapter 1, African entrepreneurs were quick to appropriate the technology of the motorcar, and as soon as cars began to be imported into Africa in the early 1900s, African businessmen began to repurpose them in order to transport both goods and people. These businessmen formed a system of informal collective transportation, not dependent on government, public bus routes, or the railway, that still today provides many people employment opportunities and affordable transport options. Moreover, as Gewald et al. argue, it is important to note that while cars might have been used to discipline colonial populations, they were also often very important technologies for anticolonial political movements. In Ghana, for instance, propaganda vans toured the countryside to campaign for Kwame Nkrumah, and in Niger in the 1950s motor vehicles were instrumental in political rallies and in enhancing political competition (5). What this all suggests is that cars in Africa have ambivalent pasts and presents, that they can be technologies of oppression and alienation as well as sources of agency.

Though the impact of the motorcar on African social life might be underrepresented in the social sciences, African films and literature have often registered and recorded the ways that cars mediate African subjects' relation to both modernity and mobility. In countless texts, African writers and filmmakers deploy cars as emblems of social and material change, the processes of urbanization, or the shifting gender dynamics that shape Africa in different historical moments. In one of the most notable literary representations of African car ownership during the colonial era, the trickster Wangrin in Amadou Hampaté Bâ's *The Fortunes of Wangrin* (2000) buys a sports car that "[speeds] along at 60 miles an hour—at a time when a Delahaye lorry couldn't be pushed faster than 20 miles an hour[—]" (172) and uses it to sell provisions to a railway company that was laying down tracks. Here, the car is a symbol of Wangrin's ingenuity and success as a resistant colonial subject. In novels taking place shortly after independence was achieved in the late 1950s and early 1960s, cars, especially luxury ones, tend to be associated with the corrupt and neocolonial elite. This is the case in novels like Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* (1969), Nkem Nwankwo's *My Mercedes Is Bigger Than Yours* (1975), Ousmane Sembene's[2] *Xala* (1973), and Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968). In the 1980s and 1990s a few feminist novels like Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1981) and Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story* (1991) began to feature women drivers and often associated the car with women's freedom, albeit in complicated ways. There are also those texts—Wole Soyinka's play *The Road* (1965) and Ben Okri's novel *The Famished Road* (1991) are the most famous examples, while Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* (2014) is perhaps the most recent—that write about road spirits and, as can be seen in the case of Okri's incantation in the above epigraph, the spirituality of vehicles themselves. Furthermore, scenes of traffic and gridlock appear with regularity in a wide range of West African urban novels. The sociologist Wendy Griswold, who systematically surveyed 467 Nigerian novels written between 1952 and 1992 (every Nigerian novel that she could identify and locate), found that the single most common scene in Nigerian literature was that of a traffic jam, or "go-slow." And indeed traffic jams and road accidents continue to be staples of Nigerian literature in texts like *Americanah, Lagoon,* Chris Abani's *GraceLand* (2004), Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's *I Do Not Come to You by Chance* (2009), and A. Igoni Barrett's *Blackass* (2015).

In African screen media, motorcars have become powerful visual tropes and are often crucial to painting scenes of both development and underdevelopment. Cars have figured prominently in both the plot and mise-en-scène of a significant number of West African art films, like Flora Gomes's *Blue Eyes of Yonta* (1992), Abderrahmane Sissako's *Heremakono* (2002), Sembene's *Xala* (1975) and *Faat Kiné* (2000), Jean-Pierre Bekolo's *Quartier Mozart* (1992) and *Les Saignantes* (2005), Jean-Marie Teno's *Clando* (1996), Jean Odoutan's *Barbecue Pejo* (2000), Moussa Touré's *TGV* (1998), Olivier Delahaye and Dani Kouyaté's *Soleils* (2013), and Philippe Lacôte's *Run* (2014). In these films cars are not just part of the background scenery but are often used to comment on the dialectics of mobility and immobility in West African social life. And while cars in many of these art films are prone to breakdown, the Nigerian and Ghanaian video films that have become incredibly popular across the continent are filled with perfectly working Mercedes-Benzes and SUVs that, though not always purchased with clean money, are key to the video films' aesthetics of wealth and glamour. Furthermore, as is the case with West African literature, both celluloid and video films sometimes link the car to witchcraft and occult practices. Thus, even while many African countries have some of the lowest motorization rates in the world and private cars are only driven by a relatively small portion of the population, African cinematic and literary texts seem to have a fascination with the moving vehicle.[3] The contradictory and socially symbolic ways that cars are deployed in West African films and literature indicate that motor vehicles in Africa "appear to have taken on values over and above their mere utilitarian function" (Gewald et al. 2009a, 4).

Of course motor vehicles everywhere, not just in Africa, have symbolic and social significance. But what is often overlooked in studies of automobility is that while the utilitarian functions of automobiles do not vary significantly—they are almost always used to get someone or something from point A to point B—the way in which they are valued, exchanged, and integrated into social life often depends on their particular cultural and historical context. In "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," Igor Kopytoff advocates a way of studying an object by providing it with its own cultural biography to understand what makes it significant in a given culture. The example he provides is, conveniently, the automobile in Africa: "The biography of the car in Africa would reveal a wealth of cultural data: the way it was acquired, how and from whom the money was assembled to pay for it, the relationship of the seller to the buyer, the uses to which the car is regularly put, the identity of its most frequent passengers and of those who borrow it" (1986, 67). Since the essay was published several anthropologists have taken up Kopytoff's challenge by writing brief cultural biographies of the car in Africa. For instance, Jojada Verrips and Birgit Meyer's "Kwaku's Car: The Struggles and Stories of a Ghanaian Long-Distance Taxi-Driver" and Brenda Chalfin's "Cars, the Customs Service, and Sumptuary Rule in Neoliberal Ghana" both examine the cultural biography of the car in Ghana. Both essays look at the business of importing used cars often purchased at auctions in Europe, the bureaucracy of taxing and licensing these cars, the built-in system of bribery, the relationship between cars and spirituality, and, in the case of "Kwaku's Car," the endless cycle of breakdown, repair, and making do without proper spare parts. Even a cursory look at the list of issues these essays cover reveals how the car in West Africa requires a biography quite different from the car in America or other "First World" countries. As Kopytoff suggests, such culturally informed studies reveal much about the way objects lead different lives in different places.

Given the diverse cultural biographies of cars and the particular sociohistorical and economic conditions of West Africa, my intent in this book is to explore the specific experiences of automobility and the feelings that it generates in the region. To do so, I examine films, novels, popular videos, plays, and poems, all meaning-making devices that are techniques or tools through which human beings constitute their relationship to the material world, each with its own unique form that focuses on the different shapes automobility takes in particular times and places. What I want to emphasize, though, is that the cultural texts I examine do not simply represent cars or reflect automobility in West Africa. More importantly, they provide a canvas on which the complexities of what Daniel Miller calls the "intimate relationship between cars and people" play out (2001b, 16). As Caroline Levine argues, fictional narratives can be understood as "productive thought experiments that allow us to imagine the subtle unfolding activity of multiple social forms" (19). In other words, the aesthetic objects discussed here are productive heuristic forms that explore the conflicting, contradictory, and overlapping lived experiences and forms of automobility, experiences and forms that are thoroughly intertwined with everyday social life in West Africa and shaped by the region's particular historical, cultural, economic, and political conditions. Throughout the book, then, the aesthetic objects I read put into relief the "multiple social forms" entangled with automobility.[4] By looking at how West African writers and media practitioners position the automobile in their stories, I am able to consider how cars in the region become both coveted and maligned, how automobiles are a part of West Africans' lived practices as consumers in an unevenly globalized world, and how people sense and internalize technology in areas where it often does not function at its optimal capacity.

Toward a Regional Automobility

I focus on West Africa in particular because creating a regional cultural study has certain intellectual advantages over a national project or one that attempts to take into account the entire continent. As I discuss in my first chapter, the history of motorization across Anglophone and Francophone West Africa, despite local differences, followed many of the same overall patterns. Colonialists were at first reluctant to motorize West Africa, but as cars became lighter and cheaper and African entrepreneurs began importing and driving automobiles, motorcars became an indispensable part of the colonial administration. And today, again despite some local differences, motorcars throughout West Africa follow similar patterns of distribution, consumption, and exchange. While a handful of cities like Ouagadougou, Lagos, and N'Goundéré have strong motorbike cultures, for the most part roads throughout the region are dominated by different types of informal shared taxis. These taxis (sometimes called "bush taxis") are either cars, often referred to by the number of places they have, with a seven-seater or five-seater being the most common, or minivans and small buses that go by different names in different countries: the *tro-tro* in Ghana, the *car rapide* or *Ndiaga Ndiaye* in Senegal, and the *danfo* or *bolekaja* (no longer in use) in Nigeria.

As Joost Beuving notes, most motorcars in West Africa today are second-hand vehicles imported from Western Europe that often arrive first in Cotonou, Benin, and then find their way to markets in Dakar, Abidjan, Tema, Lomé, Lagos, and Douala. This particular trade route developed, according to Beuving, in the 1990s in response to deregulation and the removal of trade barriers. It was made possible in part by the expanding number of West Africans living abroad with access to European cars and in part by concessions that the Beninese government made to an association of wealthy second-hand car dealers who had migrated to Cotonou (Beuving 2009, 128, 134). Moreover, changes to the Cotonou car market reflect car consumption throughout the region so that when traders in Benin began importing German and Japanese cars in the mid-1990s instead of French cars, this indicated a shift in the types of cars being driven across the entire region. And, likewise, the age of the cars being imported into Cotonou tells us much about the quality of cars being driven: the estimated age of a car imported into Cotonou in the late 1990s and early years of the twenty-first century was between fourteen and sixteen years, with only 1 to 5 percent being new or nearly new and some being as old as twenty-five years (134). Though the quality and quantity of cars driven in each West African country differs, vehicles are, for the most part, decidedly much older than those driven in Europe or the United States, where the average age of a car on the road is eight and eleven years, respectively (Curtain 2013). And this disparity between the age of automobiles in West Africa and the age of automobiles in Europe and the United States remains today even as demands for newer vehicles in Africa increase with improved economic conditions and laws in countries like Nigeria, Senegal, Ghana, and Ivory Coast now technically prohibit the importation of older vehicles.

As the example of Cotonou shows, car markets in West Africa have a specifically regional character that is influenced not just by decisions made by the nation-state but also by changes like neoliberalism, structural adjustment, urbanization, and migration seen across West Africa after the Cold War.[5] Thus, the car markets in West Africa are much like the local markets that Manthia Diawara discusses in his widely cited essay "Toward a Regional Imaginary in Africa." Focusing on West African marketplaces as sites of regional and transnational flows of capital, commodities, technologies, and imaginaries, Diawara argues that underscoring the way that goods and culture circulate in a regional context can challenge both the homogenizing forces of globalization and the nation's complicity with multinational capitalism. Given the long history of cultural exchange, migration, and border crossing between West African countries, Diawara writes that "what is urgent in West Africa today is less a contrived unity based on an innate cultural identity and heritage, but a regional identity in motion that is based on linguistic affinities, economic reality, geographic proximity, as defined by the similarities in political and cultural dispositions grounded in history and patterns of consumption" (1998, 124). Certainly, this is not meant to erase local differences or to forget that West Africa is an incredibly diverse region with hundreds of different ethnic groups and religions, different histories of European colonization, and different postcolonial political realities. Nor does it mean that the distinct legal and educational systems, languages, and cultures that respective colonial powers left behind are no longer relevant. But what it does mean is that there is a need to make space for studies that focus on the "patterns of consumption" and experiences of modernity that are shared across the region and that recognizing these connections helps to create narratives that neither subsume Africa into the homogenous global nor posit African nation-states as isolated units.

Across West Africa driving culture and street life have many similarities and follow many of the same general trends. To begin with, West African driving has a certain gendered dynamic. Historically, though market women were some of the earliest riders of informal, collective transport and though vans in both colonial Ghana and Nigeria were so filled with market women that they were referred to as "mammy wagons," driving itself has been considered a male activity.[6] Even today it is rare to find a woman driving a taxi or commercial vehicle. But women do indeed own and drive private cars, and as I discuss in chapter 5, self-made market women and financially independent women throughout the region are often characterized by the luxury cars they drive. In several Francophone countries, for instance, wealthy cloth traders are called Mama Benzes or Nana Benzes because they drive Mercedes-Benzes. This means that cars in West Africa are both associated with patriarchal power structures and, at the same time, seen as a sign of women's empowerment and liberation.

Furthermore, because roads are often inadequately maintained and are statistically some of the most dangerous in the world (see chapter 2) and because automobiles are often quite old, car travel in West Africa has a distinct, precarious quality.[7] And yet due to the lack of formal regulation, West African streets are, as Ato Quayson argues, characterized by a level of dynamism, spontaneity, and flexibility. Roads are lively spaces filled with street hawkers who mingle with traffic, vehicles are painted with slogans and mottoes, and sidewalks, storefronts, and merchants spill out into the street allowing inhabitants to create new uses and meanings for road space.[8] Anxieties about the dangers of driving are therefore often mixed with the excitement and pleasures of street life and consumer culture.

Focusing on the regional particularities of West African car culture allows me to focus on how West African cultural texts theorize the specific contradictions of West African automobility. But at the same time, I should emphasize that West Africa is not isolated from the rest of the continent or somehow singular, especially considering that much of the African continent is saturated by the same global and economic forces. Although different flows of trade and consumption as well as strong cultural and historical differences across the African continent would reveal that the car has a different cultural life outside of West Africa, there would nevertheless be many overlaps, many ways in which the part would be able to stand in for the whole. Therefore *Postcolonial Automobility* is as much a study of the regional as it is an attempt to contribute to the many important discussions of what James Ferguson refers to as Africa's "place-in-the-world" (2006, 6), a shorthand for discussing the multiple ways that Africa is both connected to and disconnected from modern, global planetary networks. What I discuss throughout the book, then, is how automobility can be a way to examine these inclusions and exclusions and how automobility as a narrative about freedom, modernity, and mobility must be reconfigured when the car is examined within an African context rather than a Western context, when the specific obstacles, patterns of consumption, and gendered dynamics of postcolonial car culture are taken as the point of departure.

Automobility "Misplaced"

Though the term "automobility" has been used colloquially since the beginning of the twentieth century to describe the type of movement associated with the motorcar,[9] it is also a concept that is deeply entangled with the automobile's promise of autonomous, unfettered mobility. Cotten Seiler, for instance, argues that automobility is a term that signifies the myths, ideologies, and supposed freedoms of American-ness and that the "sensations of agency, self-determination, entitlement, privacy, sovereignty, transgression and speed" (2008, 41) of automobility became key to defining what it meant to be American.[10] Though automobility has clearly become a global phenomenon, what Seiler, like other cultural scholars, emphasizes is that the term "automobility" has come to mean more than just the type of mobility enabled by the use of the automobile.

Originally, the "auto" in "automobile" referred to the idea of a self-propelled motor vehicle free from dependence on an animal, and it marked the automobile as a self-directed vehicle liberated from the restrictions of a rail track and able to move in any direction whatsoever (Featherstone 2005, 1). Thus, the implication is that this self-moving vehicle enables a freedom of movement for its drivers: it conjoins the modern subject's dual desires for increased mobility and a larger degree of individualization. James Flink refers in particular to the way the car engendered an age of "mass personal automobility" in America, stressing the very individualized and privatized nature of this collective phenomenon. For Sudhir Chella Rajan the automobile is "the (literally) concrete articulation of liberal society's promise to its citizens" (2006, 112–13), the leading object of a post-Enlightenment order that has not yet given up on the idea of the free and autonomous individual. John Urry takes the notion of automobility one step further by elaborating an entire system that incorporates not only cars and drivers but roads, traffic signals, parking, and fuel into a self-organizing, *auto*-poetic system. Urry argues that the notion of automobility captures both the humanist notion of autobiography, or self-making, as well as the machine's capacity for automation (2005, 26). Automobility, for Urry, indicates the idea of an autonomous human linked to an automatic machine through a network of roads, technologies, and policies. In all of these accounts of automobility, the car is valued as an agent of autonomous mobility for the modern consumer-citizen.

Automobility therefore hinges on two mutually dependent ideals: mobility and autonomy. As several scholars have noted, mobility is often seen as a fundamental aspect, a right even, of modern culture. Tim Cresswell argues that while "the idea of mobility as liberty and freedom" would not have made much sense in feudal societies that valued fixity, mobility gained prestige as cities grew in the early modern period (2006, 15). Creswell notes that it was thinkers like Thomas Hobbes and later William Blackstone who argued that unimpeded mobility was essential for liberty and was "an absolute right of man," and he goes on to suggest that these ideas have become so self-evident that "the word *modern* seems to evoke images of technological mobility—the car, the plane, the spaceship" (15). Likewise, Marian Aguiar, writing about the ideological importance of trains in colonial India, argues that "mobility came to act as a material register for who was modern, a phenomenon that continues to this day" (2011, xv). And Seiler notes that mobility is both a "disciplinary technology and a form of capital . . . an arena of contest and performative display" (2008, 11) in the modern era. Automobility couples this experience of mobility with the ideal of autonomy, an ideal that has in moral and political philosophy been equated with liberty, sovereignty, self-rule, dignity, integrity, independence, and self-knowledge (Dworkin 1988, 6). Like mobility, autonomy is typically considered to be an attractive quality and one that is enabled by the automobile. But unlike mobility, autonomy is often an unattainable ideal.

Although some people have more access to mobility than others and some mobility is forced rather than voluntary, it is clear that people and things throughout the world do indeed move.[11] But the concept of the sui generis and completely sovereign, autonomous individual has been debunked by intellectual traditions as wide-ranging as Marxism, psychoanalysis, feminism, structural anthropology, and Foucauldian poststructuralism, all theories of thought that understand the human subject as socially determined, bound by class, labor, family, gender, kinship, or historical epistemes. Nancy Yousef, in her study of the notion of autonomy in Enlightenment philosophy and Romantic literature, argues that even in Enlightenment thought itself, the idea of the self-made autonomous man was never taken as a given fact: it was never assumed that man had actually created himself out of nothing. Where the idea held sway, she suggests, was in its "theoretical and imaginative implications" (2004, 19), in its ability to assuage anxieties and fears that derived from feeling weak, helpless, and dependent. The idea of autonomy enabled people to view themselves as self-determining individuals, free from the oppressive institutions of authority, instead of as helpless individuals at the mercy of others. Automobility as an expression of autonomy works in a similar way. Like the socially determined human subject, the automobile and its driver exist within a system of dependent relations. These dependencies include, but are by no means limited to, manufacturers, laborers, laws, police officers, roads, signs, advertisements, geographers, oil companies, gas stations, and gas-station clerks. Automobility as an expression of pure autonomy is therefore essentially nonsensical. And yet, as an ideal and as a modern ethos, automobility, just like autonomy, persists.[12]

But what happens when the car is taken out of its American and Western context and placed into an environment where modernity is just as often a status one hopes to achieve as it is a given state (Ferguson 2008, 189), where autonomous mobility is often thwarted by crumbling infrastructure and worn out vehicles, and where cars are more often used for collective rather than private, individualized transport? How do narratives of automobility travel and resonate? How is autonomy recalibrated in a West African context? What I suggest is that automobility in West Africa is what the Brazilian literary critic Roberto Schwarz calls a "misplaced idea." For Schwarz, a misplaced idea is a concept that emerges from specific developments in one country but when it is transplanted into a new cultural context, it begins to fissure and expose many of its original inconsistencies and forms of dissonance. Discussing the various European "ideas" that were transformed by Brazilians, Schwarz writes, "We didn't invent Romanticism, Naturalism, Modernism, *or the car industry,* none of which prevented us from adopting them. But adopting them did not imply that we reproduced the social system of their countries of origin" (1992, 34, emphasis added). For Schwarz, both the automobile and the narrative text emerge from and are determined by the specific socioeconomic and historical contradictions of their birthplaces. But when cars or artistic movements are transplanted into an entirely new context, their original inconsistencies become apparent in different and more pronounced ways and in ways that can be read through narrative art forms. He calls these ideas "misplaced" not because they do not belong in their new settings but because by incorporating the social contradictions of their new milieu, they seem "off-center" or off-kilter in revealing and often generative ways.

Understanding automobility as "misplaced" helps to underscore the way that many of the ideals of automobility are indeed still present throughout West Africa—the car, as is the case in the West, is seen as something that will provide status, independence, and personal freedom—even though the historical conditions that created the system of mass individualized automobility are largely absent. African automobility, like African modernity, is therefore neither "alternative," as some theorists would have it, nor fundamentally different or easily categorized as "non-Western." Rather, automobility in West Africa is conditioned by distinct experiences that bring out the already latent contradictions in the term and, as many of the chapters here will show, often lead to unique or creative adaptations.

Though this book is primarily concerned with the specific affective experiences and ambiguities of car culture and automobility in West Africa, it is also my hope that thinking through the ways that West African automobility is conditioned as much by freedom, liberty, and mobility as it is by inertia, congestion, precarity, and (sometimes unfulfilled) consumer desires will shed light on what Schwarz refers to as the original inconsistencies of the idea. Since it is technically impossible to be both a fully autonomous human subject and one who is dependent on a machine as well as the entire sociotechnical institution that supports it, automobility is characterized, from the outset, by core antagonisms. It is for this reason that Steffen Böhm, Campbell Jones, Chris Land, and Matthew Peterson, the editors of the collection *Against Automobility* (2006), have proposed viewing automobility as a disciplinary regime rather than a self-organizing system. Their focus is almost exclusively on the West, but pointing to the proliferation of traffic jams, dependency on nonrenewable resources, ecological devastation, and the prevalence of accidents, they assert that within the regime of automobility "the pursuit of individual mobility becomes collective immobility" (9). For these scholars, automobility is fundamentally an "impossible" system not simply because it is unsustainable but because it is inherently contradictory: it produces as much inertia and destruction as it does mobility.

Moreover, when one takes into consideration race, class, gender, and the historical and economic reasons that certain social groups in the West (which is no more monolithic than "Africa") have had unequal access to private property, it becomes clear that automobility is not simply a privileged experience in the West and a frustrated one in Africa. Seiler, for instance, discusses the way that the car in midcentury America was part of a culture of consumerism and national citizenry that was coded as white and male (2008, 7). As Jeremy Packer argues, automobility was often regulated in part because certain demographic groups in the United States, notably women, youth, and African Americans, were historically considered unsafe drivers. Packer writes, "The unsafe form of automobility [these groups] employ (overstressed commuting, motorcycling, pimping, hitchhiking) have largely been used to legitimate the monitoring, regulating, and minimizing of access to and use of the automobility system" (2008, 9). Automobility may therefore be just as misplaced in certain communities in the United States as it is in West Africa.

Nevertheless, though the instabilities and inconsistencies of automobility are certainly not exclusive to any particular geographical region, what I argue here is that in West Africa they do have a prominence that makes them particularly influential to subject formation. As Brian Larkin argues, technologies and infrastructures in colonial and postcolonial Africa "have proved to be unruly and difficult to control" but "their failure to carry out their technical and symbolic function" is just as important in shaping social life as their success (2008, 250). Simply put, understanding the ways that West African subjects navigate their world means giving full attention to the ways that they manage their ideals and expectations about technological objects that sometimes function well and sometimes manifest the structural and economic uncertainties that characterize postcolonial daily life.

By posing the question of what automobility and car culture look like when they are "misplaced" or when African texts, rather than literary and cinematic works from the United States or Europe, are the focus, I analyze some of the messy ways that African subjects navigate their role as global consumers in a rapidly and still unevenly globalizing world where cars, like most technologies, are very much present but not always experienced in a globally uniform way. What this means is that the encounter between the African subject and global technology cannot fit neatly into developmentalist or modernization narratives, nor can it be a story of lack and absence. More specifically, thinking through automobility as a misplaced idea means complicating its relationship to the global Fordist and post-Fordist narratives to which it is usually tied. As Julie Graham writes, "From a critical feminist perspective, existing theories of Fordism and Post-Fordism offer a 'totalizing' rendition of capitalist development which fails to acknowledge multiplicity and difference in social life" (1991, 53). Building on the work of these feminist critiques of modernism and Africanist critiques of globalization, I want, therefore, to emphasize how the Fordist and post-Fordist discourses that have uniformly excluded Africa and African experiences of automobility participate in a discourse in which African mobility, as Joshua Grace argues, "is so often presented as unnatural, disconcerting, or as an indication of social crisis and decline" (2013, 405). Moreover, understanding the links between the modernist, Fordist discussions and the post-Fordist theories of globalization underscores the fact that debates about African development and modernization are far from being settled.

From Fordism to Post-Fordism

During the 1950s and 1960s, the Golden Age of Fordism, Fordist models of development, following the hopes and aspiration of Ford himself, insisted that all societies would eventually achieve the level of production and consumerism as the West. Though Fordism began in America, to Henry Ford, who claimed that the practices that he put into place in his factories would establish a "natural, universal" code of freedom, this system of production was a global one. For Ford, the eight-hour, five-dollar workday, the streamlining of the automobile, and the building of a car "for the great multitude" (2008, 52) were part of a democratic world vision that would eliminate poverty and allow each individual to maximize his or her personal freedom.[13] Fordism was therefore both a way of organizing factory labor according to a Taylorist model and a rigid model of labor that would lead to higher salaries and higher levels of consumerism. This is perhaps why the car is so central to Walt W. Rostow's *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (1960), one of the foundational texts of modernization theory, which purports that underdeveloped countries would eventually "catch up" to the West. For Rostow the mass diffusion of the automobile was the most decisive signal that a society had reached the last of several stages of development. Widespread automobile ownership would therefore epitomize the achievement of development in the stage that he called the "age of high mass-consumption" (4) and measure the advancement of the lifestyle patterns of societies. Rostow, like other proponents of modernization, believed that Fordist-style capitalism was the only road available to modernization.

However, beyond Rostow's developmentalist claims, Fordism is not a narrative that is typically paired with colonial or postcolonial history, as Kristin Ross notes in *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (1995). Rather, Ross argues that there has been a tendency to keep the two stories separate, to see modernization in the West as completely unconnected to and uninfluenced by events occurring in the colonies or ex-colonies. Ross, however, makes an important intervention by linking narratives of Fordism and modernization to the story of decolonization. She traces how the arrival of new consumer goods in France during the period of decolonization helped France to situate colonialism as a thing of the past—France could define itself as a modern nation by separating itself from its former colonies that were figured as "dirty and backward" (78). Moreover, turning toward French cinema of the time, Ross shows how the car in decolonizing France was central in shaping this new modern identity by creating new forms of factory production, a newly mobile work force, a new *jeune cadre* (managerial class), new forms of masculinity, and a new "sublime" experience of everyday life that, significantly, relied on the labor of ex-colonial immigrants. But while Ross examines the ways that the car defined forward-looking France against its former colonies, no monograph has yet examined the social and symbolic function of the car in the ex-colonies.[14]

Understanding how existing theories of Fordism play out in West Africa means, first of all, acknowledging that the postwar period of decolonization and independence was a "modernizing" one for West Africa, just as it was for both of its two main former European rulers. In the same decade that Ross examines—the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s—the number of automobiles in West Africa more than doubled, while roads and modern infrastructure in and between cities multiplied at a quicker rate than ever before ("L'évolution des marchés ouest-africains de l'automobile" 1966). And, as I will discuss further in chapter 1, this is partially the result of the importation of Ford cars that had become popular before World War II because they were cheaper and lighter than other brands and much easier on African roads. Thus, African ex-colonies were indeed going through their own period of urbanization and development, creating new spatial arrangements and expanding a middle class that was not too unlike the *jeune cadre* Ross describes. In the immediate decolonization period, modernity was often expressed as a hope for the future, a period where a "new man" could be reborn through technological development. Young cosmopolitan men in Accra at the time even referred to themselves as Jaguars and cultivated a sense of style worthy of the modern, high-class car of their dreams.[15] Commercial drivers were seen as "cultural heroes" (Van der Geest 2009, 261) and were representative of a cosmopolitan class that could come and go as they pleased (Hart 2016, 208). Furthermore, the car became particularly important in newly independent Africa because it embodied both independence and its hoped for financial rewards.

However, Fordism in West Africa at the time was experienced in distinct and often uneven ways. While collective transport often flourished, the private automobile quickly became a sign of the divide between the postcolonial elite and the masses whose lives remained essentially the same after independence. Rather than becoming part of the sublimity of everyday life, private cars, as can be seen in texts like Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and Sembene's *Xala,* were some of the most visible signs of the excesses of the national bourgeoisie. And though in Europe and the United States cars in the mid-1960s were either becoming or already "integrated into the banality of the everyday" (Ross 1995, 29), car ownership in West Africa remained relatively low. Whereas by 1966 around 25 percent of the population owned a car in most industrialized countries, in West Africa the rate hovered around 1 percent and only in the more well-off countries ("L'évolution des marchés ouest-africains de l'automobile"). While riding in motor vehicles might have been a part of everyday life for many West Africans, owning them was certainly not. Moreover, while cars in France, Britain, or the United States were often shiny and new objects, fresh off the assembly line, the vehicles arriving in West African ports were more likely to be second hand, in some cases overhauled war vehicles. Although Ivory Coast, Senegal, and Nigeria each had a few small assembly plants for European carmakers at the time, no West African country was producing its own vehicles. The Fordist regime that was penetrating Western Europe, and that had already swept up America, was therefore experienced in West Africa as something dissonant and nonsynchronous—neither fully present, nor fully absent.

And though post-Fordism describes shifts in forms of consumption and production, it too is a global narrative that often elides global differences. While Fordism was premised on industrial conditions, post-Fordism describes the change, following the global recession of the 1970s, to economies based on flexibility and rapid turnover in labor practices, production, and consumption (Harvey 1990, 159). According to David Harvey, the changes that characterize post-Fordism include the weakening of unions, the opening up of labor markets across the globe, outsourcing, the growth of the service industry, quickly changing fashions, and new, innovative technologies. In narratives of post-Fordism, the automobile itself becomes less of a central character but one that is, nevertheless, key to understanding the story. For instance, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri cite the shift from Fordism to Toyotism as one example of what they call Empire, the new political logic of a universal globalization. They argue that Toyotism is based on an inversion of the Fordist relation between production and consumption. Whereas Fordism produced standardized vehicles and had little need to listen to its consumers, Toyotism involves a "rapid feedback loop" (2000, 290) where, in theory, the decision to produce a vehicle comes after consumers have already decided it should be produced. In this argument the post-Fordist shift in the way cars are produced signifies the postmodernization of the global economy in a smooth, decentralized world.

But while theories of post-Fordism track a supposedly global shift from Taylorist modes of production to flexible accumulation, West African countries, still with no automobile industries of their own, have experienced a different shift, one where "post-Fordist" precarity and flexibility of labor are not in fact new and where Fordism often becomes repositioned as an unfulfilled dream. A post in the Facebook group The Nigeria Nostalgia Project 1960–1980 illustrates this perfectly. On May 27, 2013, one of the group's members posted a picture of an old Volkswagen assembly line in Lagos circa 1975/1976. Other group members responded by writing comments that lamented failed leadership and the lack of industrialization in contemporary Nigeria, comparing Nigeria unfavorably to countries like Brazil that moved from assembly to the manufacturing of cars rather than from assembly to simply importing them. One commenter notes distastefully that the assembly line in the photo is now a storage facility for imported rice.[16] Here, then, post-Fordism is experienced not as a move to the future but as what Charles Piot calls a "nostalgia for the future," a "longing for a future that replaces untoward pasts" (2010, 30), or a longing for a past when the future seemed possible. But at the same time, West Africans have indeed been affected by the rapid spread of consumer goods and technologies produced in a post-Fordist world, as can be seen in my brief reading of *Americanah* above. What characterizes post-Fordism in West Africa, then, is the same paradox that characterized Fordism—it is neither fully present, nor fully absent.

Global Modernity

Understanding global modernity in a West African context therefore means recognizing the unevenness of capitalist modes of production and consumption and, at the same time, acknowledging the fact that African subjects are constantly interacting with and creating meaning through global technologies, consumer objects, and media. Accordingly, it is important to underscore that, despite the fact that Fordist and post-Fordist conditions might not be neatly mapped onto a West African context, African subjects are indeed global subjects. And, as Jean-François Bayart cogently argues, global subjects are the product of a globalization that should be thought of as a mode of belonging rather than as a practice of dispossession. Positioning globalization as a process that begins in the colonial era, Bayart uses Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality to argue for an understanding of globalization as a historical encounter between "techniques of domination" and "techniques of the self." In other words, Bayart sees the global subject as one who must submit to global forces of inequality but who, at the same time, invents daily life "in a personal way" through encounters with the material world (2007, 209–10). Echoing Daniel Miller, Bayart suggests that this is why "things matter," why consumption, even as it objectifies and alienates, is also part of self-realization, of being, acting, and existing in a global world. Like Bayart, I understand the global to be a paradoxical rather than universal or homogenizing signifier that has its roots in encounters and economies that predate the shift to post-Fordism by over a century.

What does it mean, then, to talk about a global modernity? Typically, modernity, one of the most debated terms in social theory (Cresswell 2006, 16), has been considered to be a temporal category. Whether it is being used to describe a time period, a technological advancement, or a "cast of mind," it usually "involves the idea of the 'new,' the break, the departure" from a past moment (Brennan 2008, 43). However, what Ferguson convincingly argues is that for African subjects "modernity has always been a matter not simply of past and present, but up and down. The aspiration to modernity has been an aspiration to rise in the world in economic and political terms; to improve one's way of life, one's standing, one's place-in-the-world" (2006, 32). Rejecting the idea that we should see global inequalities in terms of temporality (i.e., some nations are just behind others), Ferguson writes that modernity "has come to be simply a status—a standard of living to which some have rights by birth and from which others are simply, but unequivocally, excluded" (189). This formulation is useful for two reasons. First, it deflects the chronocentric emphasis of modernity—an emphasis repeated in the now-prevalent African Rising stories (which seem to eerily replicate the predictions of Rostow) and in the modernization rhetoric used to justify projects that do little more than make access to African cities and their high-end commercial centers easier for the wealthy (Malaquais 2011, 9). And second, refiguring modernity as a standard or status provides a way of understanding how modernity can be both elusive and "at large" in the same exact space.

"Global modernity," as I use the term, is therefore a paradoxical, sometimes aspirational, and often uneven experience that has much more to do with "relations of membership" (Ferguson 2006, 187) than with teleological projects of modernization or with a deterritorialized, new (capitalist) world order. And it is my contention in this book that automobility is a paradigmatic experience of a global modernity, that it affords particular insights into West African economies of desire and modes of belonging. Examining automobility critically therefore forces one to go beyond the equally totalizing narratives of bleak underdevelopment or inevitable progress that still persist today. I see automobility, like global modernity itself, as an experience infused with both "violence and pleasure" (Bayart 2007, 251), precariousness and prestige, and exclusion and inclusion. And though Fordist and post-Fordist narratives are certainly "misplaced" in West Africa, automobility, as a claim of autonomous, unfettered mobility, remains a powerful discourse to the construction of the modern self, just as the automobile continues to give meaning to the ways that African citizens inhabit their global world.

Infrastructures of Feeling

Throughout this book, I engage close readings of literary and cinematic texts in order to highlight the many ambivalences and overdeterminations of postcolonial automobility in an increasingly global West Africa. At the same time, I want to attend to the way that these texts pay attention to the materiality of the automobile itself and how it is intertwined with the specific historical and social formations in West Africa, issues of class and gender, and the realities of infrastructural failures and longings. Such an approach, which combines disciplinary methodologies, allows me to discuss the ways that fictional works manifest the sensations, anxieties, and affects evinced by the automobile. It also helps me to analyze how men and women, rich and poor, rural and urban, might have very different experiences of automobility. Methodologically, then, I make use of a form of postcolonial criticism that, following Achille Mbembe in *On The Postcolony* (2001), foregrounds social practices and embodied relations that involve "doing, seeing, hearing, tasting, and touching" (6). Focusing, as Mbembe does, on "*time as lived*" (8, emphasis in original) and "what it means to be a subject in contexts of instability and crisis" (17) is key, I believe, to understanding the complexity of everyday life for different subjects in West Africa and avoiding some of the abstract language of "hybridity," "nomadism" or "in-betweenness" that dominates much of postcolonial and globalization theory.[17] My goal is to examine how writers and filmmakers use the car to account for the ways that postcolonial, West African subjects inhabit and create meaning through their material and infrastructural world, a world made up not of Deleuzian "lines of flight" or virtual superhighways that globalization theorists are so keen on praising but of actual roads that need to be traversed on a daily basis.

In her introductory article to the January 2007 special issue of *PMLA,* Patricia Yaeger makes a call for precisely this kind of work on literature from the Global South. She writes, "My premise is that our [current] intellectual apparatus, like the wage puzzle, is inadequate for describing the pleasures and pounding of most urban lives, or the fact that many city dwellers survive despite all odds. How can our ethical and imaginative engagements with others around the world be worked into our scholarly infrastructures? . . . What is it like to be stuck, night and day, dreaming of infrastructure?" (5). Since the *PMLA* special issue, books like Larkin's *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (2008), Michael Rubenstein's *Public Works: Infrastructure, Irish Modernism, and the Postcolonial* (2010), and Aguiar's *Tracking Modernity: India's Railway Culture and the Culture of Mobility* (2011) have quite brilliantly begun to provide such an intellectual apparatus. These works, which go beyond Yaeger's emphasis on the city, examine the structures of feeling generated by media and infrastructure (Larkin), public utilities (Rubenstein), and modes of transport like the train (Aguiar). It is my intention that *Postcolonial Automobility* will be a part of the larger discussions, which the *PMLA* issue and works by these scholars have begun, that focus on what literature and media can tell us about infrastructure and mobility and the feelings of pleasure, longing, desire, fear, and frustration that they produce. As Mimi Sheller argues, automobility "is implicated in a deep context of affective and embodied relations between people, machines and spaces of mobility and dwelling, in which emotions and the senses play a key part" (2005, 221). And as Bruce Robbins reminds us in his aptly titled article "The Smell of Infrastructure," infrastructure and access to it has often been the object of political struggle even when it "smells," when no one, it seems, is paying any attention to it. The car, then, is not simply a convenient metaphor or symptom of atomistic capitalist relations. It is also a social object that engenders ways of being, feeling, and acting in the modern world: it is an object that reflects and refracts various surfaces, from its own body, to the road on which it drives, to the social image of its driver.

A large part of what I explore in this book are the particular "infrastructures of feeling" that writers and filmmakers capture. What I mean by an infrastructure of feeling is quite similar to what Raymond Williams means when he describes a structure of feeling as a social experience, or set of "meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt" (1978, 132) in a particular historical moment. But by using the term "infrastructure" rather than "structure," I want to emphasize the feelings and "affective elements" (132) associated with the materiality of built structures and objects. Infrastructures of feeling are therefore sets of social and affective experiences that are conditioned by everyday interactions with infrastructural elements, and, as Williams suggests, these sets of feelings are often most visible in art and literature. As Yaeger reminds us, "*Infra* means beneath, below, or inferior to, while *infrastructure* represents the equipment, facilities, services, and supporting structures needed for a city's or region's functioning" (2007, 15). Infrastructure therefore always entails a "play of surface and depth (subways, water mains), of hypervisibility (bridges) and invisibility (the electrical grid)" (16). Yaeger's point here is to emphasize the fact that "infrastructure's role in literature is unpredictable and varied" (16), that there is no easy parallel between the "deep structures of cities" and the "deep structures" of the texts about them. What this means to me is that cultural texts do not simply transcode buried ideological formations, as Fredric Jameson famously argues. Though they do indeed reveal quite a bit about the hidden contradictions of capitalist society, they also, at the same time, invite readers or viewers to pay attention to the complex and surface ways that people interact with and are shaped by everyday material life and to the specific forms of technology and infrastructure that allow bodies to inhabit the world the way that they do. Infrastructures of feeling therefore are those meanings and affects that entail a constant entanglement of "surface and depth." Accordingly, this study aims to bring the deep contradictions of automobility to the surface in part by reading surfaces: by calling attention to the shiny, sleek, dinged, or damaged surfaces of automobiles and the surfaces of the roads that they occupy.[18]

This consideration of both the surface and ideological depth of the automobile is indebted, methodologically, to Roland Barthes's famous essay on the Citroën D.S. (which is pronounced the same as *déesse* [goddess] in French). Barthes calls the new Citroën a magical object, comparing it to Gothic cathedrals "created by unknown artists" and "consumed in image if not in usage" by a whole population (1957, 88). He describes how the surfaces of the car show no signs of factory assemblage, how the dashboard and levers make the car into a sleek and seamless object: "The lines of union are touched, the upholstery palpated, the seats tried, the doors caressed, the cushions fondled" (90). Reading the surface of the automobile, Barthes makes a potent argument about its ideological underpinnings. The Citroën is a reminder of the way human labor is erased and objects like the *déesse* become worshiped: it is "the very essence of petit-bourgeois advancement" (90). Barthes's reading relies on the outer shell of the car, the touch and feel of its interior surfaces, and, at the same time, the deeper meaning it reveals about labor and consumption.

But perhaps even more germane is the methodological approach taken by Luise White in *Speaking with the Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (2000), a book that discusses popular rumors in colonial East Africa about bloodsucking vampires who would capture victims in fire trucks, vans, and ambulances. White argues that, in part, these rumors can be explained by the fact that fire trucks painted the color of blood were occasionally used in blood drives, and ambulances emblazoned with suggestive red crosses were used to take sick people to hospitals from which they did not always return.[19] But White also claims that these stories, which "are about vehicles in unexpected places, used for unintended purposes" (130), must be understood in the larger context of the reservations and fears that many Africans had about a new sector of skilled laborers who worked for a colonial administration whose motives and policies were not always clear. Because many of the early vehicles had no windows, there was much fear and anxiety about the type of equipment they might contain, and many people found it hard to understand precisely what these new laborers did to receive a wage that was often significantly more substantial than what one would receive for casual labor (133). While I'll be discussing the contemporary link between occult practices and cars in Nigerian video films in chapter 4, my point here is to show how White toggles back and forth between surface and depth in order to explain the affective register of cars. What the vehicles looked like (painted red, windowless, etc.) mattered but so did various "hidden" aspects of the labor practices associated with them. Like White, I try to keep these various levels in mind when analyzing the stories that African authors and filmmakers tell about cars.

Roadmap

The chapters in this book all discuss the ways automobility and its attending infrastructures of feeling make themselves known and felt through different aesthetic objects. As Urry writes, "The car's significance is that it reconfigures civil society involving distinct ways of dwelling, travelling and socializing in, and through, an automobilised time-space" (2000, 15). Each chapter therefore takes up the various ways that the contradictions and tensions of these ways of "dwelling, travelling and socializing" in the car are refracted through and theorized in different West African literary and cinematic art forms. While the first chapter focuses on the history of motorization from the colonial moment to the decolonizing decades following World War II, the remaining chapters trace the way the historical contradictions and tensions surrounding African automobility are both repeated and transformed in aesthetic forms from the post-independence period of the 1960s and 1970s to the neoliberal era of the 1990s and early 2000s. The goal of the first chapter is therefore to show that whereas historicist versions of African economic development position the motorcar as part of Africa's road to modernization, in reality it was, and still is, part of a process that has been continually thwarted and overdetermined. Examining various events or episodes, like the first failed attempt in 1900 by French businessman Félix Dubois to bring a fleet of automobiles into modern-day Mali, alongside key literary and cinematic texts of the first half of the twentieth century, allows me to underscore how African subjects have been historically both included in and excluded from car culture and ownership. In order to reveal the ambivalences and conflicts present in the process of motorization, I concentrate on illustrative examples that have largely been absent from mainstream historical accounts of economic development and discuss how Europeans were often ambivalent or even hostile to the idea of motorizing Africa, while African entrepreneurs took the lead in importing automobiles and establishing the system of informal transportation that exists today.

Chapter 2 focuses on the tragedy of motorcar accidents through a close reading of Wole Soyinka's 1965 post-independence play *The Road* about Nigerian lorry drivers living on the urban periphery. Here, I read the road as a Bakhtinian chronotope—a space-time matrix—that includes various lived times of postcoloniality. Soyinka draws on Yoruba mythology and Ogun, the god of the road, to elaborate his philosophical views of a road that unleashes destruction and impedes progress while also creating the psychic strength needed for progress and survival. Soyinka's road also serves as a paradigmatic postcolonial space-time that comprises the swings, inertias, and "meaningful acts" (Mbembe 2001, 6) that determine how subjectivity is formed. In the work of Soyinka, who played a crucial role in founding the Nigerian Federal Road Safety Corps, automobility becomes legible not only in the movement of the drivers but also in the wreckage of their accidents, in the fallen bodies and spare parts, as well as in the psychological debris that accumulates in the consciousness of the characters. This chapter discusses how *The Road* uses the theatrical form to emphasize both the traumatizing effects of the road and the everyday heroism of the post-independence drivers and touts who have learned to survive it.

While my first two chapters discuss West African collective forms of transport, the last three focus more on private vehicles, which, because they are objects that are simultaneously coveted and viewed with deep ambivalence, are disproportionately represented in African film and literature. Chapters 3 and 4 both focus on the car in West African screen media. In chapter 3, I turn to Francophone cinema, discussing in detail Ousmane Sembene's *Xala* and Jean-Pierre Bekolo's *Quartier Mozart*. While media scholars like Kristin Ross have often focused on the shared qualities of film and cars—such as movement, image, standardization, mechanization, and displacement—this chapter discusses how African Francophone films reconfigure the link between the moving image and the moving vehicle by disallowing the automobile to represent a continuous, rational forward movement. Both *Xala* and *Quartier Mozart* engage with stasis just as much as with alternative forms of movement, and the tropes of mobility and immobility become important to understanding the filmmakers' critiques of patriarchal power structures. But whereas *Xala* focuses more on the failure of the postcolonial elite in the post-independence period, *Quartier Mozart* is a playful exploration of what movement might look like in the midst of structural adjustment and the crisis of the 1990s.

In Francophone films, private cars, because of their association with the neocolonial and patriarchal elite, are often parodied and mocked, shown to be stuck, undriveable, or otherwise immobilized. But in Nollywood, the low-budget video films that started to become incredibly popular in Nigeria and Anglophone Africa in the 1990s, the private luxury car is a highly coveted object, typically seen driving down paved roads in posh neighborhoods. My fourth chapter discusses how Nollywood videos, rather than highlighting the conditions of uneven development as the Francophone films do, center on stories of upwardly mobile neoliberal subjects and their shiny, new things. However, while video films may gleefully depict modern capitalist subjects, they also morally condemn those who become part of that commodity culture by trouncing on social codes integral to the welfare of the community at large. My readings of several popular Nollywood films, including Kenneth Nnebue's *Living in Bondage* (1992), Ojiofor Ezeanyaeche's *Blood Money* (1996), and Afam Okereke's *Boys Cot* (2007), underscore the ongoing tension between fantasies of material success depicted in the video films and the anxiety produced when wealth is acquired through criminality, witchcraft, magic, or fraud.

In my final chapter, "Women in Traffic," I look at the way that feminist texts rewrite and work in dialogue with the male-centered films and novels where the car stands in for patriarchal power and capitalist achievement. I argue that in films and novels where women are the drivers the car figures much less as a sign of upward mobility and elite status and instead highlights the ambivalence with which financially independent women move through West African urban centers. In the works I discuss—Ama Ata Aidoo's novel *Changes* and Sembene's film *Faat Kiné*—both female protagonists must negotiate their status as consumers and commodities in modern, neoliberal urban Africa. On the one hand, driving and car ownership seem to allow women certain social and economic advantages, but, on the other hand, the car can also register disillusionment with feminist fantasies of autonomy. What both texts explore are the "possibilities feminism might have within the neoliberalism in which it is taking shape" (Grewal 2005, 3).

Postcolonial Automobility sets forth an understanding of global modernity as a paradoxical social experience, formed not only by the speed of the new or the global but also, at the same time, by experiences of what I call "suspended animation," moments of pause, interruption, and disruption. In scientific discourse, suspended animation refers to the stopping or slowing of vital organs or to a body that has been frozen and may later be brought back to life. Accordingly, the idea of suspended animation implies a temporary interruption, a deferral of movement rather than a complete cessation. An automobile in suspended animation might be one that is waiting for a new spare part, one that has misfired, one that has crashed, one whose driver is no longer willing or allowed to drive, one that is stuck in the sand or mud, or one whose carcass has been put to other uses. In the 1980s and 1990s, the World Bank's push toward the free market in West Africa resulted in a liberalization of the importation of used vehicles and an influx of very old and poorly functioning cars and trucks. In the 1990s in Cameroon, where more than 84 percent of all cars had been in circulation between thirteen and twenty-two years *after* being imported as used vehicles (Tamo Tatiéste and Bidja 2002, 488), these substandard cars came to be called *congelés* (frozens). The name, however, according to Xavier Godard and Pierre Teurnier, was not only given to the cars because they were often immobilized on the roads. It was also intended to link the cars to the frozen imported chickens—also imposed on Cameroonians as part of structural adjustment programs—that were regarded to be far inferior to those raised locally. Thus, Cameroonians linked the substandard cars, their lack of national autonomy, and the stalling of their economic progress in one word: *congelé*. My use of the phrase "suspended animation" is intended to evoke both these multiple freezings and their potential for reanimation, a potential captured in both the form and content of many of the texts I examine.

What is central to my discussion of West African automobility is how this interplay of mobility and immobility is entangled with everyday experiences of postcolonial capitalism. Although the authors and filmmakers I discuss all demonstrate some level of ambivalence toward capitalist consumption, they also acknowledge how integral it is to becoming a modern, global subject. Indeed, the fact that scarcity and abundance comingle in such close proximity in the African postcolony creates a situation where it is not always easy to either fully embrace or denounce the pleasures that automobility has to offer. Therefore, throughout *Postcolonial Automobility* I analyze the car as the sign through which to read the overdetermined flows of global capital and as an object through which to assess the dangers, vulnerabilities, and pleasures global commodity culture produces for African subjects.